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ABSTRACT

This document was developed to help early childhood service providers understand Aboriginal children and their cultural context. The guide starts from the premise that it is vital that early childhood experiences are culturally relevant and affirming for individual children. Aboriginal perspectives on topics such as family, child rearing, learning/teaching, the school experience, discipline, touching, and eye contact are presented so that service providers can acknowledge and respect Aboriginal children's views of themselves. The guide discusses strategies that enable service providers to gain the confidence of parents, as well as rights that Aboriginal children have, such as access to Aboriginal staff, curriculum materials written by Aboriginal professionals, and multicultural play opportunities. Service providers are also instructed to evaluate not only their curriculum, but also their own biases, and to seek feedback from Aboriginal families and community. The six chapters cover legal framework, Aboriginal perspectives, ways of learning, ways of caring and teaching, selecting and using resources, and evaluation of a curriculum. Contains 17 references and an 11-item bibliography. (TD)

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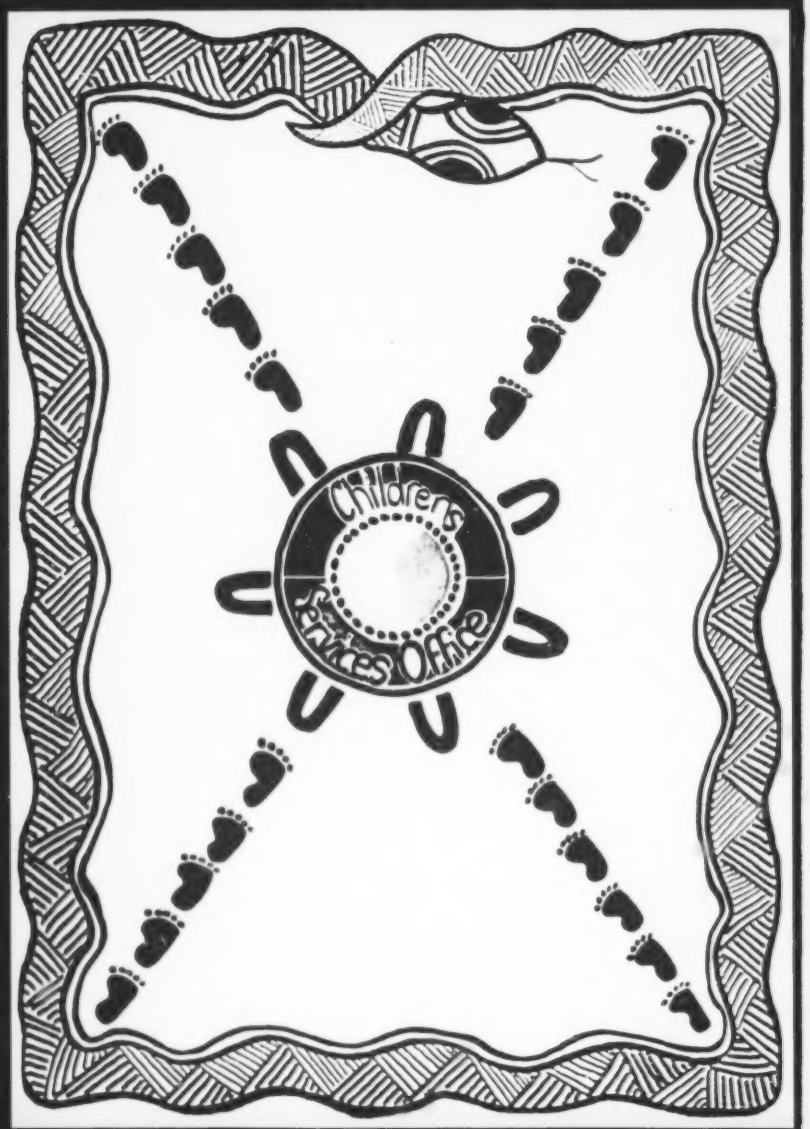
Learning about Aboriginal Children and their Culture

Curriculum Guidelines



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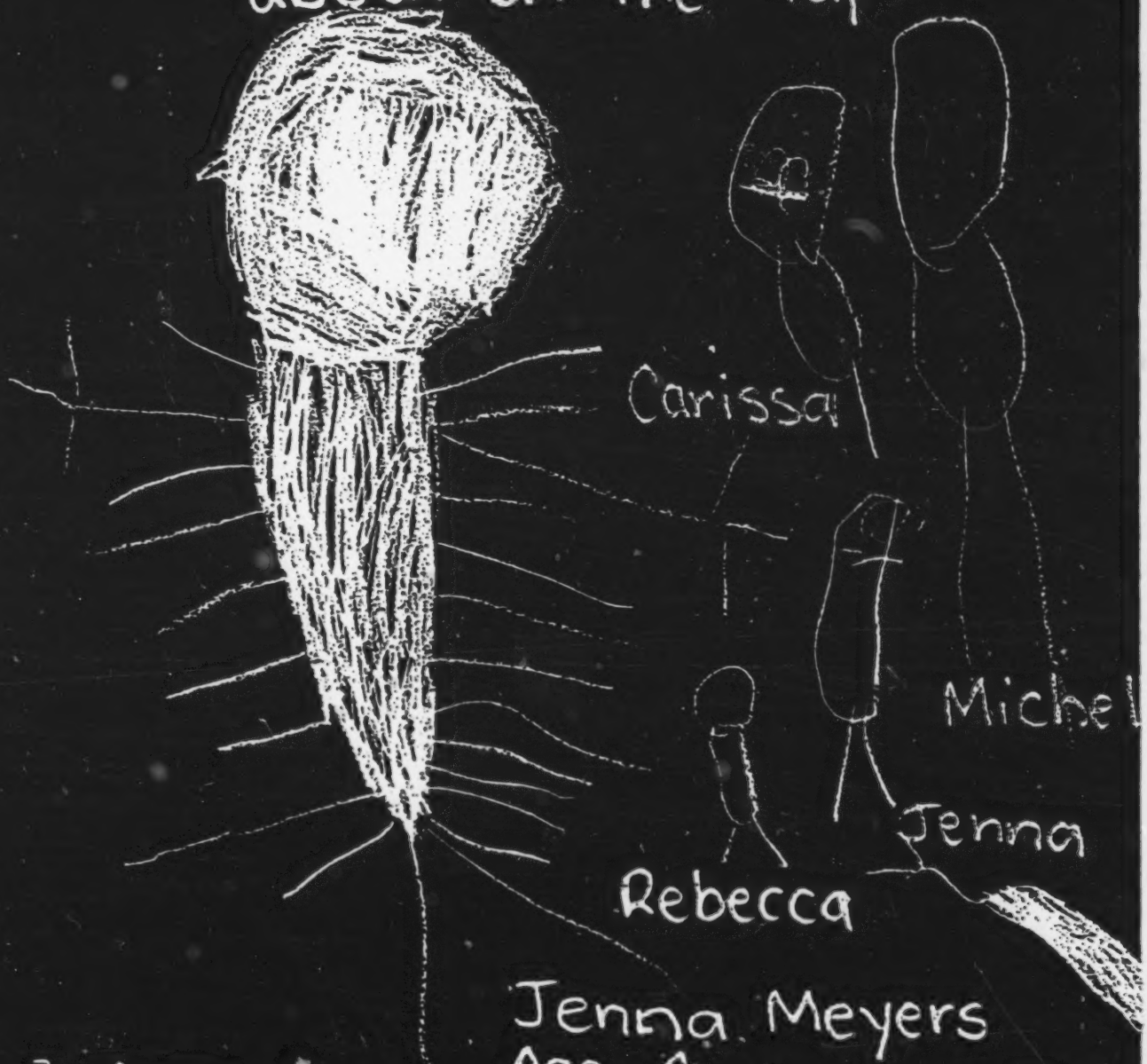
A Nunga Bird they sing about on the tape.



Jenna Meyers
Age 4
Kaurna Plain

2-4-92

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Learning about Aboriginal Children and their Culture

Curriculum Guidelines

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OFFICE
Department of Education,
Employment and Training (SA)
1993

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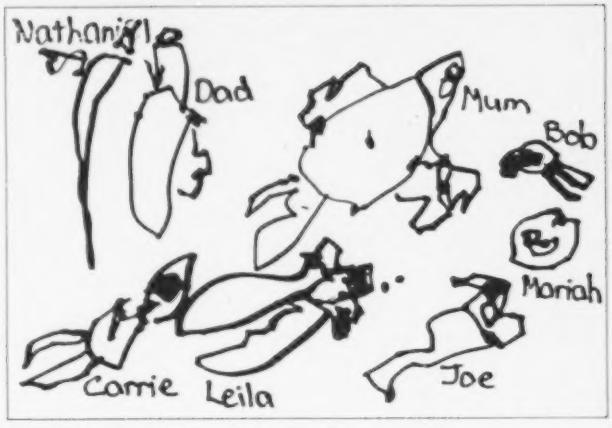
Foreword

THE importance of the early childhood years has been well researched and documented. The quality of the care and education experienced by young children is crucial not only to the development of the individual child but to society as a whole. It is vital that any early childhood experiences are culturally relevant and affirming for individual children. This means that all practices that occur in children's services must be culturally inclusive and encourage children of all cultures to take a pride in their heritage and develop a sense of identity.



The Children's Services Office believes that all early childhood staff need opportunities to learn about Aboriginal cultures and to include Aboriginal cultural studies in all children's services. Despite legislative and social changes over the past twenty years, Aborigines as a distinct cultural group still suffer from prejudice and discrimination. This affects and distorts our children's development, their attitudes, their life chances and their futures.

It is therefore up to all of us, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal to contribute to children's services that really look after children's needs.

Consultation with Aboriginal people is crucial to the acceptance of a program or a policy, and this booklet has been widely discussed with Aboriginal early childhood staff, with Aboriginal parents and community members. Keep in mind the importance of consultation when you are planning Aboriginal cultural studies for your service and working with Aboriginal children.

This document can be used in conjunction with other CSO documents, *Planning for learning (1991)* and *Services to Aboriginal children and their families (1988)* which outline curriculum and Aboriginal policies.

You also need to be familiar with the National Aboriginal Education Committee's *National policy guidelines for early childhood education.*

It is anticipated that this document will be supported by more practical material as culturally appropriate resources and curriculum kits are developed.

Stephanie Page
Acting Director of Children's Services

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"Non-Aboriginal Australians need to extend dramatically their understanding of Aboriginal realities. They need to understand what we have contributed to this nation, and what we can and do contribute."

Lois O'Donoghue
"Sir Robert Garran oration" p15

THE Children's Services Office has made a firm commitment to ensuring that all early childhood services meet the needs of Aboriginal children and their families in their communities. With the launch of *Learning about Aboriginal children and their culture*, the Children's Services Office has furthered this commitment.

This document should be used as a guide for all early childhood services providers, to be adapted according to your situation and to your children's needs and interests. It is intended that this document be used when planning, implementing and evaluating your curriculum. It raises questions that are likely to be encountered when working with young children and their families. The information contained in this document is intended to be used as a framework for you for reflection and action.

The aim of this document is to assist service providers to develop awareness in understanding Aboriginal children and their cultural context. The basis of this understanding relies on the following beliefs:

- Aboriginal children have the right to retain their own cultural identity
- the identity and self esteem of Aboriginal children must be supported by the services offered to them
- Aboriginal children have a unique contribution to make to Australian society
- Aboriginal parents and communities must be consulted about the care and education of their children
- Aboriginal parents, professionals, and community members should be given opportunities to contribute to the planning, management, implementation and evaluation of care and education programs
- Early childhood workers have a responsibility to know about and be sensitive to the basis and diversity of Aboriginal cultures and to demonstrate this in their practice
- all children, even though they may differ in race and culture, share many attitudes, skills and behaviours

The United Nations Convention On The Rights Of The Child

THE United Nations Convention On The Rights Of The Child which is now part of international law, was ratified by Australia in 1990. These articles are particularly relevant to the future of Aboriginal children and should be used as a basis to ensure that Aboriginal children's care and educational rights are met.

Article 4

States Parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognised in this Convention.

In regard to economic, social and cultural rights, States Parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international co-operation.

Article 8

1. States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognised by law without unlawful interference.
2. Where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to speedily re-establishing his or her identity.

Article 29

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to
   a. The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential
   b. The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedom, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations
   c. The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, for the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilisations different from his or her own.
   d. The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.
   e. The development of respect for the natural environment.
2. No part of this article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principles set forth in paragraph 1 of this article and to the requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.

Article 30

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, to use his or her own language.

(The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990, The United Nations)

For more information about this Convention, contact:

U.N.I.C.E.F
Shop 19, Southern Cross Arcade
Adelaide 5000. **Phone (08) 231 0415**

CHILDREN'S INTERESTS BUREAU
CitiCentre, 14 Hindmarsh Square
Adelaide 5000. **Phone (08) 226 7052**

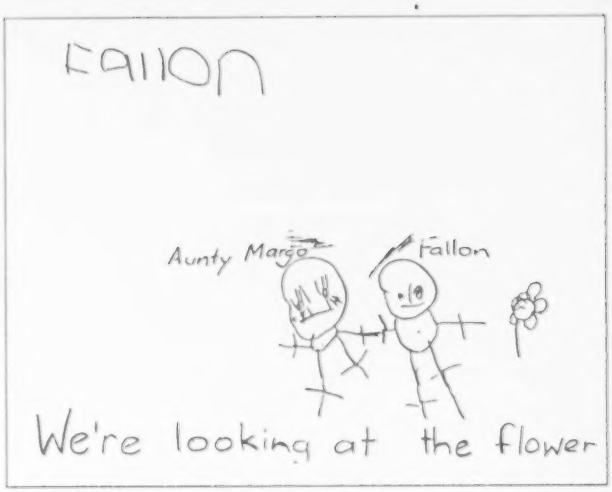
Colour Race and Culture

Colour and race, and race and culture should not be confused.

THERE are 16,020 (1991 Census of Population and Housing) Aboriginal people living in South Australia. They live in a variety of communities which can be described as:

- traditional
- traditionally oriented
- transitional
- urban

Their views on life are diverse, and they all want the best for their children. Reflect on the views that follow. They are from well known Aboriginal people, writers, educators, poets and young people.



Who is an Aborigine?

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies and is accepted as such by the community with which he or she is associated. A person may not be obviously Aboriginal in appearance, but may regard himself or herself as an Aboriginal.

(Children's Services Office, 1988)

What Does it Mean to be an Aborigine?

In a letter to *The Australian* in 1968 E.J. Smith of Alice Springs wrote, 'Why do people (including Charles Perkins) of less than 50 per cent Aboriginal blood persist in referring to themselves as Aboriginals ?'

In his reply to this letter Charles Perkins said, "Firstly we were usually born on Mission Stations . . . We were therefore identifiable to ourselves as well as white people as 'the Aboriginals.'

Secondly we were related by kinship, blood and cultural ties to our full-blood parents or grandparents. This tie can never be broken merely because the degree of 'blood' may vary, or if white authority or individuals wish it so. *(Gale & Brookman, 1975 p11-12)*

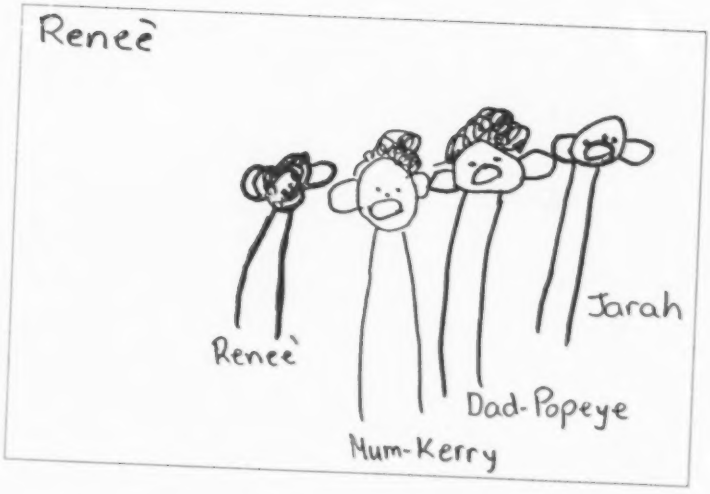
Being Aboriginal is not the colour of your skin or how broad your nose is. It is a spiritual feeling, an identity you know in your heart. It is a unique feeling that is difficult for a non-Aboriginal to fully understand . . . *(Burney, 1982, pp10-15)*

***Forgotten* – Margaret Brusnahan**

It's sad when my children want to know
Of Aboriginal legends of long ago,
Of Dreamtime stories and corroborees
Things that should have been taught to me.
But how do I tell them that I missed out
Simply by being shuffled about
From one white home to another,
And that's how nobody came to bother
To tell me that I had a family tree
Or even that I was part Aborigine.

I had to wait until I was grown,
To find my people on my own.
It's impossible to learn in a very short time
The language and culture of these people of mine.
I feel I am selling my own kids short,
But how can I teach them what I wasn't taught?
So have patience my kids, I'm anxious too,
To know these thing as much as you.
Maybe in time we'll still this yearning.
But remember my kids, I too am still learning.

(Mattingley and Hampton (Eds), 1988, p 115)



***Murray River Woman* – Jenny Grace**

I grew up on the Murray River near Nildottie. My father was a fisherman during the open season on Murray cod, and the rest of the year we'd spend travelling by boat between Renmark and Wellington trapping water rats for a living.

My parents always feared the welfare coming and finding us living in an old shack so I think that was one of the reasons that we kept moving – we had a little boat and we'd load it up with all of our stores, like flour and things. Most of the room would have been taken up with the boards, and I would have to sit on top of them. These boards were used for pegging out rat skins.

We'd just travel around, maybe row about seven miles, camp near where there was a big swamp or something, where we thought it was going to be good for rats. I think Dad had about 120 traps and they would have been the most valuable possessions that we had. That was how we made money – we couldn't get money from anywhere else. We'd set out the traps and then after we'd brought in the rats we'd skin them and dry them. We'd stay in one place for about three days usually, until the skins dried, and if we ran out of boards to peg them on we'd peg them onto the gumtrees then roll them up ready to be sold. *(Pring, 1990, p 158)*

***From the Shoulder* – Faith Thomas**

One thing I feel denied is that I didn't learn my language and the Dreaming stories. I can't speak my own language and God, I've tried. I tried to talk Pitjantjatjara at the University. I was the only blackfella there, and I was the only one who failed. I shamed us. I just don't have a thing for language . . . eventually my old aunties couldn't handle it any longer.

"You'll come down for tea tonight my girl". And down I went, Aunty Alice and Aunty Annie. They sat me down and said "We're going to teach you to talk your own language." *(Pring, 1990, p 39)*

Family

JACK: That was the idea of giving in marriage, my grand aunt used to tell me. She said this was a good idea. She never knew her husband until the day they'd arranged to get married; and they were married and had to go their own way then. I think there was a lot in our way of running this country.

LEIGH: I reckon there was too.

JACK: We had fair control over our children, but we haven't today because other laws are stepping in.

ANNIE: See from Mannum, there were twenty five dialects from Mannum to Murray Bridge here. That's the difference in the tribes. That's how much tribe people there were along here. Different dialects; different tribes. From Mannum to Murray Bridge there were twenty five, one person told me. She used to tell me a lot. Down near Swanport, that's where they used to always gather for their big day – giving in marriage. Different tribes used to gather there. That was one of the big tribal grounds there, but that's all closed. It's all water. So today, children, they just go their own way. They won't listen. They won't take any teachings.

LEIGH: What do you think can be done?

ANNIE: Well it's funny like, we meet people and we sit down and talk. And I suppose our ancestors done that, and our old people. I used to know when my parents used to . . . Friends used to come there, they'd sit down and talk, and have a cup of tea and all this and that. But we were never around to listen. You were seen and not heard. That's how it was. I would go away and play.

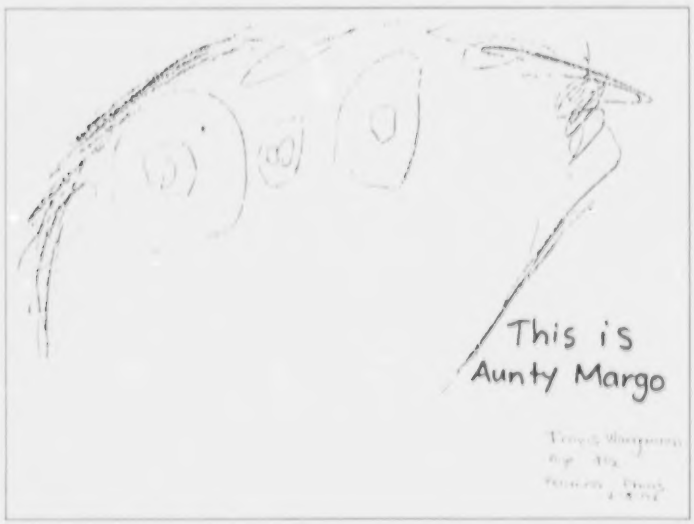
JACK: We've got no older people to talk with us. We're about the only two oldest ones around here . . . *(Ely, 1980)*

Jimmy Barker

"When we arrived at Mundiwa there were only two families living there, both in old shacks on the riverbank. We lived in a tent for some time and moved into a tin humpy later. Mundiwa was called Diraluda in Muruwari, and was forty five miles from Brewarrina. It was a camping reserve for Aborigines, though I did not know this at the time. Gradually more people came to live there, most of them very old and speaking in Muruwari. This was the last remnant of a large tribe. As time passed I became very fond of these old people, and it was from them that I learnt more of the Muruwari language. They used it all the time, and if I did not understand they would explain it to me in part-English. In the evenings they would sit under the trees and talk; if it was winter they would be crouched around a fire. I loved visiting them and listening to their stories of the early days: mythical stories of birds, animals and constellations . . .

"We used to camp out a lot. I loved it in the bush, and still have a special feeling for it. Sitting under the brigalow trees at night was wonderful, especially after rain. The smell of gidgee brigalow seemed to put life into me; it did then and has done so throughout my life. Frogs croaked in the water holes, and the clear water we drank after a large meal of kangaroo or emu we had caught and killed ourselves. The men caught emus in the same way as their ancestors had. The fact that emus are such inquisitive birds helps considerably when catching them. Old Jimmy used to make me lie on the ground and pedal with my legs in the air. The emus would come to investigate this odd sight; the men would jump out from hiding and hit them with a bundi. The result was a good meal for us all . . .

"When we had eaten we would still sit around the fire, and the old people would talk to one another and tell us stories of long ago. The other children might fall asleep, but I always listened to the stories even if I pretended to be asleep. They usually spoke in Muruwari, and it was easy for me to understand as I was speaking it most of the time. Even Billy could understand it now. They talked about the seasons of the year; these were recognised by the ripening or withering of various types of fruit or growth. Spring was welcomed as the fruit ripened and the animals moved more freely. Autumn was the time of withering, and scarcity of food would follow. These old people were not governed by the passage of time as we are today. On the other hand, they studied the movement of the sun during the day and would refer to the four phases of the moon if some specific time had to be nominated. They were always aware of the movement of the stars at night, and noted their height and position in the sky. The movements of Jupiter and Venus were important, one position at night and another in the early morning were definite events. By watching the stars they could always guide themselves through the bush. In those days time did not need to be very accurate, but it was possible to have a reasonable knowledge of the passage of time." *(Barker, 1977, pp 9-13)*



Children

The diversity of lifestyles and the sense of identity is an integral part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society in general. As such this needs to be acknowledged by curriculum designers and developers and to be evident in programs that are developed and implemented for and about Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Through curriculum Early Childhood Educators need to be made aware that they must recognise, foster and respect Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander children's particular view of themselves. Early Childhood Educators must remember that these children need to function in society as themselves. Their identity needs to be securely founded and maintained in their own cultural frame of reference. For it is only when a person's identity is firmly established and stable that they can attempt to cross into other different cultural frames of reference without becoming lost or confused.

(National Aboriginal Education Committee 1989, p 10 Commonwealth of Australia copyright reproduced by permission)

". . . children are very important to my people. They represent not just the physical future of our race, but are also the means by which Aboriginal culture itself will continue.

"I have heard it said that the idea of 'childhood' as we understand it today – as a separate, special stage of life – is a modern development. Once children were much more integrated into the economic and social world of adults. That integration could take the form of sending them to work as soon as they were able. To a certain extent this was also true of traditional Aboriginal societies.

"Children had a certain economic role. They mostly accompanied their mothers as the women, in company with others, foraged for food. The women taught the children skills and socialised them.

"However, the various stages of life were also marked out and scrupulously observed in the ritual cycle. In the case of males, initiation, usually in the early teens, took them into the world of men. Here their training continued. There were also forms of initiation for women.

"The socialisation of children is crucial to the continuance of any set of values or way of life.

"And the bond between parent and child, between the elders and those who would eventually take their place, was one aspect of Aboriginal society that was drastically affected by the European invasion of Australia."

(O'Donoghue, 1991, pp124-125)

Learning and Teaching

Teachers who stick in my mind are teachers who treat everyone in the class equally and who have time for students. *(Kris Matthews in Miller & Hall, 1987, p 24)*

Education was very important in our traditional society. It began in early childhood and continued into adulthood as part of daily life. Yami Lester, who was fortunate to receive traditional education, describes it

> "When you travelled along with your fathers or mothers they'd be teaching you . . . They'll tell stories not only to do with the land, but also stories about how people should behave . . . When there was no European school the adults had the children with them all the time, and they'd teach them how to talk and how to behave." *(Mattingley and Hampton (eds) 1988, p 99)*

Lucy Lester says

> "People say they're slow learners, but they're not. If they were taught in our language they would learn quickly. Our bush children learn by knowledge being handed down by our parents, our old people - tracking, hunting, which food is good, dancing , songs. That was our Aboriginal way of schooling". *(Mattingley and Hampton (eds) 1988, p 114)*

"And the learning is not hard, Aboriginal people say

> Some women were laughing together at Belyuen, mothers and mother's mothers, over some boys who had dallied on the way to school.
>
> They were doing a Kung Fu, just like in the pictures last night. They were good, too. Really good. They can easy learn.
>
> That is a phrase we hear often from adults when referring to children. Children learn easily - and we would add - if they do it using their own cultural styles." *(Coombs, 1983, p 100)*

> "Our sense of humour is more laid back. You tend not to take offence at teasing and parodying. We try to instil this attitude in our kids from a very young age, to get them to take criticism and not take themselves so seriously. My six year old doesn't take criticism very well whereas the younger one can give and take as good as he gets. The oldest has been spoiled by her grandparents, being the first grandchild." *(Agius et al p 15)*

School Experience

"There are two essential components that make good relationships. They are talking and listening. Talking means that you must be prepared to be open, honest and sincere. It doesn't mean that you have to give away your life's secrets, but it does mean that you let your students know you're human and that you have feelings. Secondly, you have to be an active listener and show the students that you are interested in them and what they are saying.

Another factor I have learned that can improve relationships with Nunga students is the ability to approach the students on the same level. In traditional Aboriginal culture there are very few relationships that involve someone telling someone else what to do. It is more a process of guidance and mutual learning where the two people work in union and harmony. Very much an equal relationship rather than a more European style of learning with the expert and the clinical distance between the two. I know that for some teachers the distance between themselves and students is a way of coping, a sanity saver. This I think is especially true of beginning teachers. However, this distance prevents learning from occurring. Building trust and honesty into relationships within your classroom will lead to effective and rewarding learning experiences both for your students and for yourself."

(Richard Nelson, in Miller & Hall, 1987 p 34 Part 2)

***Born Out Bush* – Milly Taylor**

"When I was in the home we got clothes and the dark ones weren't allowed to have clothes. They had to run around naked. I was the silliest one there I think, I used to run away with all the kids and take my clothes off and go home naked because I'd look funny, only one got clothes, everyone else has got nothing.

My father used to get clothes for us, but when I was in the home there, only half-caste kids used to have clothes and all the dark ones go without clothes when they started school. It was cold, too, winter time. They had sort of a big waterhole there on the side of Ernabella in the creek. It was a spring running all the time and everyone had to have a shower in the morning. All the kids had to line up and dive in that water and come out other side and no towels. They had to run around until they got warm.

They used to make a fire to get warm and the teacher used to come along with a whip. That was Mr. Trudinger. I don't know if he's dead or not. He went back to America. They got a film of that time - the people in Ernabella. When I went up there about four years ago, they showed me it. Only about one year I went to school. That's why I can't read and write." *(Pring 1990 p 146)*

Lewis O'Brien, of University of SA, Underdale, says

"I always remember my time at school, how they'd taunt you. 'When are you going to build a house, you mob?' 'How do you keep your food?'

And things like that. Because you defend your people, they keep needling you. And you think, when are they ever going to let up? . . ."

Cliff Coulthard, Aboriginal Cultural Officer with the Education Department, remembers

"As a child it is painful to go to school. The teachers want to do things their ways. And your family, your aunties and uncles, your mother and father, expect you to do things the old ways. Like eye contact. The teacher says, 'Look at me!' But that's very rude in our culture for a child to look at an adult who's speaking to them. So if we learn to do that at school and then do it when we go home, there's trouble.

When I went to school there was no Aboriginal Studies then, none of our own language. It was all white settlement history and Captain Cook. It made it seem as if our culture was unimportant."

(Mattingley & Hampton (Eds) 1988 pp105-106)

***"What I like about school"* – Raelene Lang**

"One of the things that I like about school, which is Port Augusta High, is our Aboriginal Drama group. It is made up of about two boys and about six girls. We have been getting together for about three weeks now this term. At the moment we are just getting to know how we as a group of nine can start a conversation up. We are doing this so we can maybe perform in NAIDOC week. The teacher who started this was Ms Galanis who's a drama teacher in our school, and does the school plays every year.

This is the first Aboriginal Drama group we've had so far in our school. We started it by one of the Nunga kids suggesting it to certain people because hardly any Nunga kids join in and do play with whitefellas. Too shame! They think they'll do something wrong. But when the Nunga kids act and work with other Nunga kids they feel comfortable and not shame. So Ms Galanis put it on and asked if anyone was interested in doing plays and a few girls said they was. They performed in front of the primary school, a kindy and an old folk's home. The play was well done. So now we've got another group for this second term.

"The reason why I joined in this group was to improve my abilities in acting and to get over my shyness. I did drama lessons last year with Ms Galanis, and she asked me if I was interested in doing a play with just blackfellas in it. We rehearse and get together in our own time, which is usually lunchtime. I reckon it's really good having an Aboriginal Drama group because it shows teachers, white students and even black ones that black kids can achieve some things which other students can achieve, if they put something into it." *(Miller & Hall, 1987, p 15)*

One responsibility of the adult in planning curriculum is to understand the significance of the above experiences in children's daily lives.

**EACH CHILD: is a member of a family within a community;
has a particular cultural and social background with specific beliefs, values, attitudes and customs;
is a unique individual in terms of culture, gender, abilities, interests and learning styles.**

(Children's Services Office, 1991 p 11)

How can you use this information when working with Aboriginal children?

How different does the curriculum need to be to cater for Aboriginal children?

To what extent do the Aboriginal children in your care reflect these traditional values?

Can you use this information to implement curriculum for non-Aboriginal children?

Aboriginal Children

EVEN though many other aspects of culture change, the socialisation of children, or the ways Aboriginal children learn to become Aborigines, persists. This is because the ways children are reared is of fundamental importance to the continuation of the culture. Information that babies and children need is learned informally, through contact with close relatives, and is aimed at producing self-sufficient children who rely on their own observations to learn.

Babies and children are socialised in multi-age groups, so children learn to look after younger ones from an early age. Adult restrictions on these groups are minimal, so childhood peers are a strong and powerful source of learning. In direct contrast with European styles of child rearing, Aboriginal children are included in all goings-on in their family and community and there is no division. They are not excluded from any activities just because they are children.

Obedience to adults is not expected and children are not expected to behave towards them in any special ways because of their age. This means that there is no compulsion to listen when an adult talks or to do what an adult asks. Babies and children may also have several relatives whom they call "mother" or "father", due to the extended kinship basis of Aboriginal society.

> Children are the responsibility of the entire family rather than of the biological parents alone. Many Aboriginal people have been "grown up" by members of the family other that their biological mother and father and this practice of growing up children is still very widespread today. Often it is the children's grandparents who carry out the growing up.
>
> They are also very important members of the family unit and are heavily relied upon to play a large part in childrearing. As a result of the children being encouraged to think and have responsibility at a very early age, they have a large degree of personal autonomy.
>
> *(Daylight & Johnstone, 1986, p.27 Commonwealth of Australia copyright reproduced by permission)*

Specific characteristics will be present in the family of a young child

Learners may come from a variety of home environments.

Homes may differ in

- styles of verbal communication
- styles of non-verbal communication
- predictability of parents or older siblings
- knowledge of and exposure to adult events
- family religion
- amount of reading material in home
- amount of "activity materials" in home
- role of extended family
- type and consistency of child discipline
- attitudes toward school attendance
- family mobility
- amount of responsibility child has for younger children in home.

(National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1989, p 14
Commonwealth of Australia copyright reproduced by permission)

The following attitudes and skills are valued in learning

- independence
- learning based on personal trial and error
- using initiative
- exploring the environment
- co-operation rather that competition
- discovery learning, with the active participation of the baby or child
- observation, which results in a highly developed use of the senses
- imitation, learning by direct doing
- repetition and persistence to complete a task
- use of concrete materials, in real life situations
- highly developed physical skills.

Competence

Competence is an evaluative term often used among early childhood workers. It too, has cultural meanings.

To Aboriginal children, generally speaking, it is better to appear ignorant about something than to make a mistake. As children are permitted freedom to explore their environment they learn to become competent, on their own terms, and to improvise and innovate. So, Aboriginal children become very competent at not only adapting an object like a cardboard box or a powdered milk tin to many uses but also at seeing the future potential uses inherent in an object.

> "When one is accustomed from childhood to perceiving the potential, as well as the actual, properties and qualities of things, and when one is encouraged in childhood to manipulate and explore things in the physical environment, one becomes very competent, through play, and through observation and imitation too, at learning the manipulations which result in successful combinations and of avoiding those which result in failure. In other words, one learns to anticipate where mistakes will occur and thereby avoid them. Additionally, when perfection is not a high priority - approximation - within a certain range - is acceptable and adjustment always permissible, in fact, necessary. This approach to activities is, one can argue, the only feasible one when other people have to be taken so thoroughly into account."
>
> *(Coombs, 1983, p.81)*

Aboriginal children are generally above average in gross motor skills, for example, climbing, ball handling skills and balancing. They are encouraged by peers and parents to find their own levels through trial and error.

Sharing of all resources is a very important part of all aspects of Aboriginal children's lives, this may apply to fruit time, having several care givers, and even mothers. The extent to which the children in your care have been brought up expressing these ways will determine the curriculum that you plan.

Language

You often hear Aboriginal culture described as an "oral culture". This means that information and knowledge is passed on by older people to the younger ones in a variety of language and art forms. Information is not stored in books. Knowledge then, has a very personal dimension.

There were between 500-700 languages spoken in Australia. Now there are less than 200. The language destruction has been a part of the cultural destruction but, as with child rearing values, language is crucial to an understanding of how and why children think and act.

Some features of language you may encounter are

- language is present and past oriented
- language expresses basic values of the culture, e.g little verbal discipline towards children, use of personal, individual names avoided, very little direct question and answer as a technique for finding out information
- non-verbal, gesture language often used
- taboos may apply in relation to who may associate with whom, or in speaking the personal name of a recently deceased person
- it may be seen as rude behaviour to engage in constant eye contact while in conversation
- long silences, in which to reflect, are appropriate
- talk occurs when the person is ready, and has something to say
- there is no pressure to stay and listen to someone who is talking, just to be "polite"

Aboriginal children may use,

- Aboriginal English
- standard English
- a Creole or Pidgin
- traditional Aboriginal language or languages.

These are all "proper" languages, logical, rule-based and structured.

What you can do

- understand that the children's language is part of their developing self concepts
- respect the validity of the children's language which may mean that you learn to appreciate different pronunciation and the meanings of gesture
- build on the bilingualism of the children
- extend the children's language skills

Communication

Parents and the local community will only become involved in the Centre if they see that it is relevant to do so and if they feel welcome and their opinions and ideas are asked for and respected.

Unless what you can offer children is a valuable, positive environment which supports and extends their home experience, the children will be alienated.

Good communication relies on

- a good relationship with the community
- demonstrating genuine, not intrusive interest in the community and the children
- understanding that you need to work with and through the already established lines of communication, eg. Aboriginal Community Workers

Aboriginal children are shy, especially with people they don't know or who are new. They stay like this for two or three weeks or maybe a month before you get them to say anything and look you in the eye.

"Sometimes they don't say anything, just nod. If you're talking to them and you want them to say "yes" they don't say anything. If you push yourself they won't respond if they think that they themselves aren't ready. So they keep to themselves a bit longer, especially the girls. All that time they aren't saying anything. It's not that they don't want to know you; it's just that they are studying you. You will find them looking at you many times.

The reason why some children take longer to talk to you is because they want to know you properly first before they start talking. I know white people talk a lot to each other before they know each other properly.

Aboriginal people use their eyes a lot and they listen, and when they are sure in their own way they will talk, probably just "yes" or "no" at first. Children could be more open in some places. Do not push yourselves towards them; be yourself." *(Unganmerr, 1976, p.3)*

CHILDREN NEED: a physically and psychologically safe environment; a nurturing environment that promotes a sense of belonging and self worth; to be recognised and valued as individuals; challenging opportunities to extend their development; opportunities to build on their confidence to approach new experiences.

(Children's Services Office, 1991, p.12)

THROUGH the curriculum, it is essential that all service providers not only acknowledge and respect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's views of themselves, but that they foster a positive program which meets the children's individual needs.

The Curriculum

Whether you are working with babies of a few months or 3 year old children, if you have routines, a plan of experiences, and you are learning too, then you have a curriculum.

Developmental appropriateness is a key feature of a good early childhood curriculum, but the following are also important

- consistency in learning, for the children
- scope for activities initiated by the children
- positive support for inter racial and cultural learning

Adaptations

The extent to which you adapt the curriculum depends on a number of factors, including

- the cultural backgrounds of the children
- the aims of the curriculum
- your resources.

Even with few resources, changes to provide appropriate experiences can occur.

For instance you could

- work outside as much as possible
- use the immediate environment as a source of learning
- use family groupings.

Some Aboriginal people mistrust white institutions and some do not recognise their authority. This is due to the Aboriginal person's own childhood experiences which have now made them wary of non-Aboriginal organisations. It is therefore of the utmost importance to gain the confidence of the parents. You will need to demonstrate that you can be trusted with their children.

Strategies

The following suggestions could be appropriate in your situation

- use straight talk - no jargon
- assist with organising transport
- provide experiences that build self esteem as a regular part of the curriculum
- examine your own attitudes. They may be subtly revealed and could hinder good communication.
- ask whether a meal and sleep could be offered as part of the program
- look for role models for Aboriginal involvement
- keep fees for excursions as low as possible and collect in pension week
- be aware of the literacy levels of the families of the children
- notices to families need to be short, clear and sent out not too far in advance.

Children's Curriculum Rights and Needs Identity/Survival

It is vital that the early childhood learning experience in a service is appropriate, positive and enhances self esteem. Some alienating factors in an early childhood setting might be,

- use of personal names
- methods of discipline
- competition
- being indoors
- racism (see Glen Palmer's work on this - listed in the Bibliography)
- mixed gender groups
- the furniture or food
- writing and language use
- eye contact in personal interactions
- "Whitefella" values, for instance in dress and hygiene.

Aboriginal children have the right to

- have access to Aboriginal staff
- curriculum material written by Aboriginal professionals
- activities in which they can experience success
- resources and materials about Aborigines
- appropriate displays and recognition of cultural events, eg. NAIDOC Week
- multicultural play opportunities
- relevant learning methods based on the best available information
- supportive programs - this may take the form of a meal and sleep or a health and nutrition program

Situations that Challenge

Do you assume that Aboriginal children are going to be a "problem" because they are "different"?

The following behaviours and issues may cause a problem for you until you

- understand the meanings that the Aboriginal people concerned give to the issue
- check your own attitudes to, and information on the matter. You may be making things worse by stressing difference or seeing difference as deviance
- discuss the matter with parents and family and listen to their explanation.

Discipline

It is clearly nonsense to tolerate harmful behaviours from a child just because the child belongs to a distinct social group.

Traditionally, Aboriginal children have a very free life where they determine their own boundaries, settle their own conflicts and learn to conform through the reinforcing of positive behaviours, ignoring mistakes and being teased or shamed.

Teasing occurs to prevent irregular behaviours occurring, to correct behaviours, to help children survive in a very public society and sometimes to reinforce differences among Aboriginal groups.

Shyness

Aboriginal children need time to size up situations. They may think that it is odd to be singled out by an adult and questioned and they know that it is safer not to say anything than to say something which can be seen as incorrect or a "mistake".

Touching and Hugging

Touching and hugging are important behaviours to Aboriginal children. This builds their self-esteem, this helps them learn to trust people and to establish good relationships.

Eye Contact

Avoiding eye contact is polite behaviour, so for an adult to stand in front of a child demanding eye contact in a question and answer "teacher" manner is both rude and intrusive in Aboriginal eyes and puts the child in an embarrassing situation best dealt with by looking down and saying nothing.

Sulking

Often when children are disciplined or have a disagreement with another child, they sulk and this could continue for some time.

Irregular/Non-Attendance

This may occur for a wide range of reasons. To find out you will need to deal with this on a personal basis, by talking with Aboriginal staff, family, or perhaps members of the wider community

Remember, however, that every child has a right to have her or his privacy respected and to confidentiality.

Television Watching

Suburban Aboriginal children are very much a part of the whole group in a household neighbourhood and participate in activities on their own terms. This goes for watching television which is often not censored in any way.

This is an area where your views might be in conflict with some Aboriginal parents. We believe that because of your professional responsibility to all children it is important to try to influence the parent to use television appropriately.

Health Issues

Common health problems which you may encounter are ear infections, chest infections and runny noses. Depending on the seriousness of the condition, it may affect the children's learning and ability to enjoy life within the service.

Learners may exhibit the following mental and physical health characteristics:

- eager to share and to show affection
- uninhibited
- fearful of public health institutions because of negative experiences
- hearing impaired (otitis media in about one-third of children)
- likely to be above age level in gross motor development
- unable to distinguish fact from fiction (a few children)
- allergic
- anaemic
- needing dental attention
- low weight for height
- heavier than desirable.

(National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1989)

There are Aboriginal health workers and medical services. You may need to contact them.

Aboriginal Staff

The Children's Services Office employs approximately 46 Aboriginal staff, working at most levels of the organisation.

Aboriginal field staff are the links between their service and the community and are often the spokesperson for that community in dealing with important issues outside the service. This may intrude on work, especially when it involves urgent family matters.

Aboriginal staff are good resource people, but don't assume that they can take total responsibility for everything Aboriginal.

The following extract from "A Certain Heritage" gives some more insight into how most Aboriginal children's values in relation to learning and teaching are expressed.

Some Aboriginal ways of Learning and Teaching

1. Knowledge is property and people have defined, private not common rights in it.
2. Aborigines have not yet invented childhood.
3. Aborigines emphasise observation and imitation in learning rather than questioning and direct instructions.
4. Aborigines believe that people learn by doing not by learning to do it.
5. Learning this way is not hard, they believe.
6. Learning this way results in the simultaneous integration of several discrete thought processes.
7. The social cost of a mistake is greater than that of admitting ignorance.
8. Aborigines reinforce correct behaviour.
9. Aborigines ensure conformity with a number of mechanisms, especially teasing.
10. Aborigines have competitive instincts.
11. Aborigines pool their resources.
12. Aborigines learn by person-orientation rather than information orientation.
13. Aborigines use non verbal communication as much as verbal.
14. Aborigines rarely display extremes of emotion in interaction.
15. Aborigines measure both time and space differently from Europeans.
16. Aborigines see their culture as the greatest learning and teaching resource available to Aboriginal students.
17. Aboriginal children handle and investigate all things within reach resulting in exploratory behaviour, persistence and repetition as learning strategies.
18. Aborigines identify differently from other Australians.
19. Aborigines speak more than one language.

(Coombs, 1983 pp 122-123)

Of primary importance are the people who take an active role in planning and implementing programs that facilitate each child's growth and development.

(Children's Services Office, 1991, p 20)

Aboriginal culture is "the greatest resource available to Aboriginal students." *(Coombs, 1983, p 115)*

CONSULTATION with members of the Aboriginal community is, once again, crucial when selecting resources. This is not only one way of showing respect and understanding, but it can help you avoid causing offence. It may reveal new dimensions in caring for children and it may enrich your program in ways you never imagined.

Did You Know?

- in some areas didgeridoos and particular sacred implements should not be used by women
- some symbols in art are sacred
- a story may be owned by a particular person or group and is not seen as suitable for children
- the name of a person who recently died causes offence if spoken

Who would you consult in your local area to clarify the above situations?

Even though the children in your service live in suburban houses, have pale tan skin, or don't seem obviously "Aboriginal" in speech and behaviour, the values and ways of perceiving the world and child rearing practices in their families will be distinctly Aboriginal.

Resources are only as good as the people who use them

Do you

- choose sensitively?
- create your own where possible?
- integrate across the curriculum?
- purchase resources that have several functions?
- check your materials for paternalism/prejudice?
- ensure materials are inviting and extend children's experience and knowledge of other cultures?

Criteria for choosing resources for use in an Aboriginal cultural studies program

- correct information – does not portray Aboriginal people as primitive or "stone age"
- recent information – contemporary images portrayed
- positive images – avoid stereotypes
- promote appropriate attitudes – no one culture in particular is portrayed as better than any other
- respect for cultural sensitivities
- language – avoid insulting, denigrating terms, choose stories that portray active, positive images of language and culture
- check for implied or stated value statements that reflect opinions rather than facts
- check for use of concepts which are inapplicable to Aboriginal cultures
- examine the likely effects your chosen material will have – is it divisive, does it portray a healthy appreciation of other peoples?
- are representations of people in puppets, dolls, etc. accurate and realistic so that children can explore differences and diversity in a positive way?
- would this enable every child to feel good about her/himself; reinforcing self esteem and identity?

Resources can be

- people – parents, grannies, local community, cultural instructors
- audio – visual
- pictures, posters, paintings
- kits
- wallcharts
- artefacts
- games, toys, puzzles
- books, journals
- places, visits
- newspapers, magazines
- a camera, video
- government and non-government agencies
- your immediate neighbourhood.

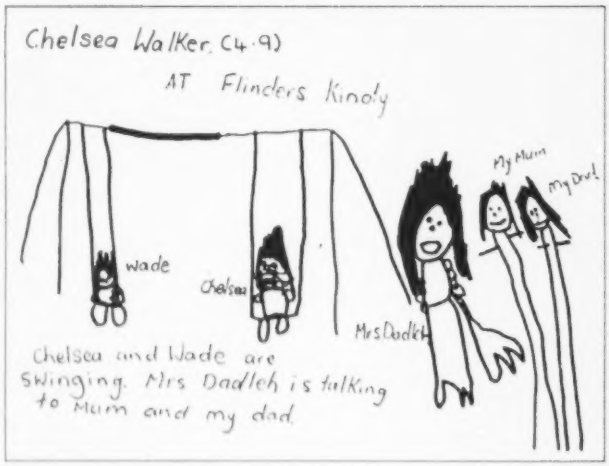
Evaluation of a Curriculum

Evaluation is a basic part of your curriculum.

The purpose of evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum in achieving your aims.

Evaluation must identify particular needs

- what skills and knowledge has/have the child/ren got?
- what are their needs?
- who am I planning for?
- what is it I want the child/ren to learn?
- when is the best time to program this?
- where is the best place to do this?
- how will I implement the activities?
- where can I get more information?
- who can I ask?
- how can I involve parents?



Evaluating your curriculum should be a continual process throughout the week/term/year, to effectively plan for each and every child's needs.

Some processes used in evaluating

Observation

- looking, listening
- implying what children are thinking and feeling from your observations of what they are doing
  Beware of your own biases!

Questioning

- direct/indirect
- one to one or a talk with a group
- the most useful questions are open questions
- give children time to answer

Recording

- it is useful to record anecdotes
- keep children's stories and paintings, dated and annotated
- time limited running records

Checklists

- if planning to use a checklist you will need to modify it if intending to check the development of an Aboriginal child as you will be aware Aboriginal children have very different learning styles. Therefore Anglo-Saxon checklists will be useless to check the developmental levels of Aboriginal children

Feedback

- this could be from the children, parents, staff or community, informal, or formal response

Self evaluation

- this is also an integral part of any evaluation. Some questions to ask yourself can be-
  - Does each aspect of the program relate to the overall objectives?
  - Are the program goals relevant, given the particular Centre, the families and the political and social context of early childhood services?
  - Do I have clear goals for the children's learning?
  - Do the goals accommodate different developmental levels?
  - How do I use observation of the children to increase my knowledge and understanding of individual needs?
  - Do I respect confidentiality in relation to the children when making program information available to others?
  - Do I regularly review materials and resources, in relation to the best early childhood practice, curriculum goals and current information and issues?
  - Do I keep parents informed?
  - Do I regularly communicate with parents?
  - Do I regularly communicate with staff?
  - Do I regularly evaluate?

Evaluation is a process which uses information to make judgements and decisions. Evaluation may indicate the need for change . . .

(Children's Services Office, 1991)

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Audio visual resources

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